
2004

Montes Azules: Who is Really Destroying the Rainforest?

Kari Lydersen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo>



Part of the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lydersen, Kari (2004) "Montes Azules: Who is Really Destroying the Rainforest?," *Diálogo*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol8/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Diálogo* by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Montes Azules: Who is Really Destroying the Rainforest?

Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

Who Is Really Destroying the Rainforest?

Kari Lydersen Chicago, Illinois

A flash of lightning silhouettes the wiry figure of Jose Jimenez Cruz as he raises his fist to make a point.

"We want our new generation of kids to be able to see all the different kinds of animals and trees here," he said, as smoke wafted around his body from a nearby campfire and a mangy dog sniffed his high mud-caked rubber boots. "We are conserving these plants and animals so our children will know them. We are taking care of our mother earth."

Sheets of tropical rain pound on the thatch roof of the open air hut where Jimenez and his family prepare their food, in the Nuevo San Rafael community of indigenous Chol people in the Montes Azules region of the Lacandon rain forest in Chiapas, Mexico.

Jimenez and the other 60-some members of the community, also known as Ignacio Allende, have only been here a year and a half. They came because, as supporters of the EZLN (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional) army, they were being terrorized by members of the Paz y Justicia paramilitary group in their home community of El Calvario. A little boy who huddles by Jimenez's legs saw his father murdered by Paz y

Justicia in January 1998. Around that same time a woman was raped by the paramilitary group.

Because of this ongoing violence from the paramilitaries, Jimenez and his companeros struck out to find a new home in the jungle, where the Zapatista movement for autonomy and dignity for indigenous people was born. The group tried living in two other locations, where they weren't able to grow food, before ending up in Nuevo San Rafael, which is separated from the nearest gravel road by a 45 minute hike through jungle and pastureland and a canoe ride across the muddy Lacantun River.

Now they have built a community of thatch-roof huts and open air kitchens and live a sustainable existence growing corn and coffee.

But along with many other communities in the region, they are in a critical struggle to hold onto their land. The government is trying to roust them from Montes Azules, claiming that they are destroying the federally protected natural bio reserve and that the land they are on belongs to the Lacandon Indians. The Chol, Tsotsil, Tseltal and Tojolabal indigenous communities that

call Montes Azules home see these arguments as flimsy pretexts for what they see as the government's true aims: to open the Lacandon and Montes Azules in particular up to scientific research by international pharmaceutical companies, eco-tourism outfits, hydro-electric power projects, and the extraction of lumber, oil, uranium and fresh water.

Besides the fact that they need land and homes where they can survive free from paramilitary violence, part of the reason the indigenous communities are determined to stay in Montes Azules is to guard the jungle from this type of exploitation by foreign companies and others with an interest in its rich natural resources.

Since many of the communities threatened with removal are supporters of the EZLN, their removal can also only be seen as part of the government's ongoing counterinsurgency campaign against the Zapatistas. In 1995 the federal government began heavy militarization in the jungle, and this militarization has been increased recently. In 2003, coinciding with the start of the US's invasion of Iraq, the Mexican Navy began patrols on the

The Nuevo San Isidro community in Montes Azules, Chiapas. The community is under threat of expulsion by the government and paramilitaries. Photo by Kari Lydersen

Usumacinta River which borders the Lacandon, supposedly to prevent terrorists from entering the country from Guatemala.

The Lacandon, along with the nearby Chimilapas rainforest, is known as the third most biodiverse region in the world behind Indonesia and the Amazon River Basin. It is home to one third of Mexico's bird species, one quarter of its animal species and almost half its butterfly species. It is also one of the world's primary sources of fresh water, and it is rich in oil and uranium.

About 80 percent of the Lacandon has already been destroyed by logging of its precious mahogany, cedar and other hardwoods that started in the 1800s, providing wood for expensive furniture for the wealthy elites of Spain, Mexico, England and the US.

After the timber companies had taken all they could from large swaths of the jungle, cattle ranchers moved in to make use of the deforested land, further clearing it for grazing. As the rainforest tried to reclaim the land, ranchers used pesticide to kill the so-called "bad weeds" that were springing up. After several cycles of pesticide use, much of the soil became so damaged that it can't even support cattle grazing anymore.

"The World Bank promoted cattle ranching all over the world in the 1960s and '70s," said Miguel Angel Garcia, coordinator of the group Maderas del Pueblo (Trees of the People), which works to conserve the Chimilapas and Lacandon rainforests. "The beef produced here is destined for urban areas in central Mexico. Many indigenous people were convinced that cattle ranching was the way to go, that it was progress to turn jungle into pastureland. But now there are large areas of pasture without cattle, because the soil is so poor. And the forest has been destroyed."

The Mexican government actually encouraged many indigenous people to move to the jungle to do cattle ranching.

Then starting in the 1950s and '60s, as part of the agrarian reform process, indigenous people living in the Lacandon could petition for legal title to their land. As of 1972, 47 communities had filed for title to the land; with 17 having been awarded titles and 30 others are still caught up in the bureaucratic process.

In 1971 three communities of Lacandon Indians, numbering about 400 people total, were among those who filed for legal title. They asked for a total of 10,000 hectares. But to their surprise, while most of the claims took years to process, just eight months after filing the Lacandones were awarded a total of 614,321 hectares, about 1.2 million acres, or a third of the whole 1.8 million hectare Lacandon jungle.

"It was like they won the lottery without even buying a ticket," says a booklet put out by Maderas del Pueblo.

In 1978 the government declared 331,200 hectares of the Lacandon as the federally protected Montes Azules bio reserve, with about 70 percent of the reserve covering land that had been awarded to the Lacandon Indians. The area awarded to the Lacandon also included many of the other communities, including those who had and had not yet been given legal title to their land. In the last few years a number of new communities like Nuevo San Rafael have also been created within the area supposedly owned by the Lacandon. Other indigenous communities are outside Lacandon Indian territory but within the Montes Azules reserve. Many of these communities are aligned with the Zapatistas, others are aligned with the PRI party and still others with ARIC-Independiente, an organization which typically sides with the PRD party which controls the state government.

According to the US-based group Conservation International, there are 225 communities in the protected area of Montes Azules. Thirty-two of these, mainly ones sympathetic to the EZLN, have been declared to be "illegal." Conservation International and other US-based groups, along with the Mexican government, blame these communities for "destroying" the rain forest. The government has issued orders for the removal of at least 21 communities, and locals estimate there are about 60 communities pegged for eviction.

Jimenez said that on May 8, 2002, representatives from the federal government offered the residents of Nuevo San Rafael 100,000 pesos (about \$10,000 US) to leave the land, but they refused.

"We don't want money, we want the land," he said. "The government dispenses gifts, like a kilo of maseca, a



Nuevo San Isidro community in Montes Azules, Chiapas. Photo by Kari Lydersen

**WE WANT OUR NEW
GENERATION OF KIDS
TO BE ABLE TO SEE
ALL THE DIFFERENT
KINDS OF ANIMALS
AND TREES HERE.
WE ARE CONSERVING
THESE PLANTS AND
ANIMALS SO OUR
CHILDREN WILL
KNOW THEM. WE ARE
TAKING CARE OF OUR
MOTHER EARTH.**

kilo of sugar, a liter of oil. But we don't want gifts, we want the land."

Nuevo San Rafael and the other communities under threat of expulsion are under constant pressure from the government and the Lacandones to vacate the land. They frequently receive visits from Lacandones armed with machetes and guns, and often the Lacandones are accompanied by members of the Navy or government officials from PROFEPA (Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente), the attorney general's office in charge of the environment, or SEMARNAP, Mexico's department of the environment, natural resources and fisheries. They come across the Lacantun River in large canoe-like boats often carved out of mahogany trees, similar to the canoes the other indigenous communities use, except the Lacandones' boats have motors. Sometimes they come in Navy boats.

For example on April 12, 2003, three boatloads of armed Lacandones landed in Nuevo San Rafael and threatened the community that they had to be gone in 15 days. They also stole a \$4,000 video camera from visiting indigenous videomakers with the Chiapas Media Project. Jimenez says that Hector Trujillo Gomez, an official with PROFEPA, and Navy members were present during the robbery and did nothing to stop it. The community has filed a complaint with the courts regarding the incident, but nothing has happened yet.

"It was 2:30 pm when they entered the community," says a written report about the incident. "They all entered but three Lacandones were the most aggressive. They said we had to leave these lands, they had firearms and one fat Lacandon had tear gas. The majority brought machetes. They didn't respect us and they verbally assaulted a group of human rights observers who had arrived that day. The Lacandones said we had 15 days to leave the land. The government officials stayed back and didn't say anything."

The typed report, which Josue compiled through his work with the Red de Defensores Comunitarios por los Derechos Humanos, a San Cristobal-based network of human rights defenders, also describes harassment and intimidation suffered by the nearby Nuevo San Isidro community, a Tsotsil community which has been there only six months after fleeing paramilitary violence in their

home community of Chavageval.

The same day the Lacandones stole the video camera, they also paid a visit to Nuevo San Isidro and told the community to be gone in eight days. Again, government officials were present "and did nothing to calm the aggression of the Lacandones," says the report.

These visits to both communities continued throughout the spring and summer. For example on April 25, 2003, two Lacandones accompanied by 11 Navy soldiers, PROFEPA rep Trujillo and another government official entered Nuevo San Rafael and threatened them, and on April 27, the community was invaded by nine armed Lacandones who came in Navy boats along with Navy members, according to the report.

During a visit Jimenez and his 16-year-old daughter Maricela made to Nuevo San Isidro in July 2003, the community members gathered in a dirt-floored, thatch-roofed school house to discuss the intimidation they are suffering. A young man named Alfredo read painstakingly from a handwritten log the community was keeping of Lacandon activity.

"The Lacandones said if the government doesn't solve this problem, they will do whatever they want," said Alfredo.

The government has told the different indigenous communities that it will mediate discussions between them and the Lacandones. But given the fact that the government has obviously been supporting the Lacandones, the communities scoff at the suggestion that it could be a neutral mediator. The Zapatista-aligned communities have said they will not dialogue with the government until it honors the San Andres Peace Accords, which were negotiated between the government and the EZLN in 1996.

"The government has the mentality that they can do whatever they want, but we won't stand for that," said Jimenez, 38.

In April 2003 the 32 communities slated for removal filed a complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, arguing that among other things their rights to the land are protected by Article 169 of the International Labor Organization treaty, which Mexico has signed.

Meanwhile there are various inconsistencies in the awarding of land to the Lacandones, even besides the fact that about 66 Lacandon families were given so much of the jungle while about 4,000 other indigenous families were given nothing. For one thing, two of the three communities where the Lacandones live were outside the boundaries of the land they were given. In 1985 the government extended their holdings even more to include these communities.

And the critics of the Lacandon are quick to point out that they really aren't historical residents of the Lacandon at all. The original Lacandon Indians were all killed by Spanish conquistadors after putting up what is often described as a valiant, centuries-long struggle. The last two known Lacandones are said to have died in a Guatemalan prison in 1712. The Indians now known as the Lacandon, or "so-called Lacandon," as their detractors call them, are Mayans who originally lived on the Yucatan peninsula and migrated to the Lacandon in the 1700s. They are also known as Caribes, since they originally come from the Caribbean.

However with the government's blessing they have eagerly taken on the role of the ancestral inheritors of the Lacandon jungle, even capitalizing on this identity to run various tourist operations on their land.

In 1974 the Lacandon signed a contract with a quasi-governmental company called COFOLASA for the logging of 35,000 cubic meters of wood per year.

"It's a lie that these Lacandones are the ancestral owners of the jungle," said Garcia, who also worked as an advisor on indigenous affairs to the government before being fired for 'disloyalty,' he said. "The government needed an intermediary who would let them extract wood from the jungle, and the other communities wouldn't let them do this, but the Caribes (Lacandones) would. Now the Lacandones run all kinds of tourist outfits, they have all these signs in English saying 'Historic cornfield this way' or 'Ancient temple that way.' Most of the young people speak English instead of Mayan to work as tour guides. Everything they do is fake."

In addition to cash for the logging contract, the government has reportedly also given the Lacandones gifts such as a small airplane and SUVs.



A young boy in Nuevo San Isidro community in Montes Azules, Chiapas. Photo by Kari Lydersen

THE LACANDON, ALONG WITH THE NEARBY CHIMILAPAS RAINFOREST, IS KNOWN AS THE THIRD MOST BIODIVERSE REGION IN THE WORLD BEHIND INDONESIA AND THE AMAZON RIVER BASIN.

"Historically in the jungle there have always been disputes between different indigenous groups," said Elizeo, a representative of the group CIEPAC, the San Cristobal-based Economic and Political Investigative Center for Community Action. "But the government is manipulating these conflicts and manipulating the famous so-called Lacandones so it can exploit natural resources."

Eco-tourism of the type run by the Lacandones is one of the reasons so many parties have their sites set on the jungle. Throughout Latin America, there has been much controversy over operations that claim to be ecologically friendly but are really more or less regular hotels with some "greenwashing" thrown in.

A good example of this dichotomy was the 2002 Isuzu Challenge "Ruta Maya" (Mayan Route), which featured a caravan of SUVs painted with tiger stripes barreling through the jungle in the name of rainforest preservation in November 2002.

The event, which is held in a different remote location every year, billed itself as part of "the struggle against illegal deforestation and tree theft that exploits the largely isolated areas of the forest for the chopping and stealing of rare and expensive trees."

The event web site also notes that the Isuzu Challenge "contributed cellular and satellite systems to aid the forest rangers and local authorities in searching, locating and preventing tree theft and Many local indigenous residents saw it as a "Challenge" to their sovereignty and peace, however,

and as another example of foreign incursion into the Lacandon. (NGO leaders also note wryly that one of the challenge participants was Israeli General Avihu Ben Nun, a key figure in the first Gulf War and hardly known as an environmentalist).

The Isuzu Challenge participants stayed at Rancho Esmeralda, an eco-tourism lodge that has also been a point of contention. In March 2003 Rancho Esmeralda owners Ellen Jones and Glenn Wersch left the area, saying they were forced out by the Zapatistas and demanding five million pesos from the government in restitution.

The ranch has now been taken over by Zapatistas, who maintain that while they didn't force Jones and Wersch to leave, the land where the ranch is located belongs intrinsically to the indigenous people, not a foreign entrepreneur.

While Rancho Esmeralda is no longer operating, Garcia notes that there are numerous other eco-tourism projects in the works, including luxury operations with five-star hotels.

Construction has already been started on a major hotel complex in Lacanja Chansayab, built by the company Gerardo Turrent-Inmobiliaria San Martin. On Dec. 17, 2002 the Chiapas secretary of tourism also announced plans for resorts built by other large companies including Xcaret and Xel-ha. Xcaret has already drawn intense criticism for the environmental impact of one of its resorts in Cancun.

Along with eco-tourism, indigenous leaders and advocates are also

concerned about what is often termed bioprospecting, or more critically, biopiracy. That is, the influx of scientists and representatives of pharmaceutical companies researching the curative properties of local flora and fauna, and indigenous people's knowledge of them, with the intention of patenting their discoveries for marketing.

Indigenous communities are afraid that large-scale research in the Lacandon will eventually destroy the environment and displace their communities, and they know they will get little or no benefit from whatever discoveries are made. Already there is a biological research station in the Chajul area of Montes Azules sponsored by the US organization Conservation International and the Mexican organization Espacios Naturales y Desarrolla Sustentable AC. Conservation International has well-known ties with agricultural and energy industry giants including Monsanto, Exxon and formerly Enron, hardly confidence-inspiring as far as protecting the environment goes. Garcia notes that another research station funded partly by the Ford Motor Co. is also under construction in the Rio Tzendales area, though a legal complaint has been filed seeking to halt its development.

Two of the companies which have an interest in research in the jungle are the large Mexican biotech firm Grupo Pulsar and the San Diego, CA-based company Diversa, which has come under fire for its plans to patent microbes at Yellowstone National Park. Diversa actually had a contract with the government to do research in Montes Azules, but it was canceled due to local pressure.

Meanwhile US groups including Conservation International have been among the most vocal proponents of evicting the "invading" communities of indigenous people from Montes Azules. With funding from the US Agency for International Development, Conservation International has been carrying out periodic overflights of the region. The group has blamed numerous fires which were observed during the overflights on indigenous slash and burn agriculture techniques, but independent analysts say the fires are the fault of military and paramilitary exercises. Meanwhile many indigenous residents lambast Conservation International for its alliances with big businesses, and they see the overflights as a way to keep tabs on dissident communities and lay the groundwork for multinational development projects.

A US representative of Conservation International, speaking for background information, noted that while the group does advocate the removal of the indigenous communities from Montes Azules, they are also working to help relocate the communities and develop alternative economic sustenance for them. The Mexican office of Conservation International did not return emails for this story.

In an article in the paper *Cuarto Poder* in July 2003, government officials said that while they respect the rights of people legally living in Montes Azules, since the Zapatista uprising of 1994 the area has seen many "invasions" by indigenous groups which are harming the environment. Officials noted that the jungle plays a crucial role in regulating the climate and is home to rare species such as the guacamaya bird and the white tortoise. The article said that each new home built by indigenous "invaders" represents the loss of 10,500 plants and the disappearance of species.

"Most Mexicans don't realize the extent to which the presence of this jungle affects our daily life," said Oscar Moctezuma, director of the NGO *Naturalia AC*, calling the jungle's preservation a priority for national security.

Indigenous residents counter that the building of tourist outfits, research stations and other operations supported by the government cause far more upheaval in the jungle than the simple, sustainable indigenous communities.

"They say we are destroying the rainforest, but it is the opposite," said Jimenez. "The multinational companies are destroying the rainforest. We are protectors of the rainforest. It is part of our way of life. We are the friends of the jungle."

The government has in fact promised to give new land to the communities it is trying to get out of Montes Azules. But most aren't buying it. Some communities which have voluntarily left the land already have ended up as refugees. For example one small Chol community of five families did leave their land with the promise of new land, but instead they have ended up living off the generosity of another community on the Chiapas-Guatemala border. In an article published in *Cuarto Poder* in July 2003, representatives of the community complained about lies the government had told them and threatened to return to Montes Azules if the government didn't give them new land soon.

"If we want we can walk four hours and be again in the land of the Reserve," Domingo Perez Gomez told the reporter.

Jimenez and many other indigenous people feel that the way things normally go in Mexico, if the government gets them off the land it will be free to carry on with the tourism, bioprospecting, hydro-electric energy and other projects it has planned, and they will be thrown to the wind, without land or homes once again.

If they are displaced from the jungle, after having previously been uprooted from their home communities in different parts of Chiapas, they fear they will join the ranks of indigenous people who are no longer able to make a living on the land at all. They are likely to be forced into the industrial workforce, ending up toiling in maquilas (factories) in Mexico City or along the US-Mexico border.

"Many businesses also have an interest in exploiting and utilizing the displaced indigenous populations as cheap labor for maquilas," says a report about the Montes Azules situation published by the Autonomous Council of Communities in Resistance, a Zapatista organization.

However since these maquila jobs are disappearing as well, going to Asia where wages are even lower, there's a good chance they won't be able to

make it in the maquila zones either. In that case their only choice may be to take the huge risks involved in crossing illegally into the United States, splitting up their families and abandoning their culture along the way.

Marcelo Mendez Guzman, a member of the *Red de Defensores* from the Palenque area of the Lacandon, noted that many of his family members have already moved to the United States, and that there are whole towns in his region with no men because they have all gone to the US in search of work.

"Many people are migrating out; the youths are going to Cancun, Guadalajara and the majority to the US," he said. "In my community of about 1,500, 20 young people have already gone to the US and a lot more are talking about it. It has changed the community a lot."

Before the mid-1990s there was very little immigration from southern Mexico to the border or the US, but today immigrants from Chiapas and the neighboring states of Oaxaca and Vera Cruz make up a large portion of the migration to border cities and US cities like San Francisco and Chicago.

"This can all be understood as part of the process of globalization," said Elizeo. "Chiapas is a strategic zone for implementation of Plan Puebla Panama and other mega-projects and designs the government has with multinational companies."

When these projects come in, many of the people will have to go.

In short, Jose Jimenez, Alfredo and the other residents of Montes Azules are struggling to hold on not only to their homes in the jungle but to their ways of life.

July 2003

Kari Lydersen is a reporter for *The Washington Post*, Midwest Bureau. She is also an instructor in the Urban Youth International Journalism Program and has a book about globalization and immigration from Latin America forthcoming on Common Courage Press. Contact her at Karilyde@aol.com.